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WHY AM I A MOSLEM?

“IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE MERCIFUL, THE COMPASSIONATE.”

HAVING, by the unbounded mercy of Him, who is the Protector and Guardian of the believer, traversed round the world in search of enlightenment, and by His bounteous mercy enjoyed a liberal education in eastern and western languages, whereby I have been able to catch a few of the sprays of knowledge as they waft through the wide universe from the Great Fountain of Truth, I gratefully accept of the invitation to answer the question “Why am I a Moslem?”

It is the very question which was put to me more than a quarter of a century ago by a half-educated teacher of Christianity as he stood preaching in the streets of Agra. It is a question which I have often put to myself as I studied the English Bible. It is a question which has been asked me by many intelligent gentlemen during my travels in Europe and America. What apprehensions of soul, what anxieties of mind, what yearnings of spirit this important inquiry has cost me none other knoweth save my own heart, and that God “who is nearer to us than our jugular vein.” How often has my heart burned with indignation when I have heard the name of my Prophet (upon whom be peace!) slandered by unthinking men, or have read the strange misrepresentations of the Moslem’s faith as recorded in the polemical works of Christian writers! The old bigotry of the Crusaders has not died out, and Islam has still, in its condition of apparent hopeless helplessness (foretold by the prophet), to bear with patient submission all that dominant Christianity dares to say or do regarding it. Nearly every book written against Islam drives the inquiring mind into the barren ocean of atheism, for they take from under their feet the basis of belief in an inspired record and cast one anchorless and rudderless on the sea of doubt. Had it not

been for the broad and liberal teaching of the Honorable Siyyid Ahmad Khan, C. S. I. of Alighur in North India, I should long since have lapsed into an atheistic condition of mind, for the schools of the London University and the moral conditions of London society are not calculated to establish one's belief in supernatural religion.

It was that enlightened teacher, the Hon. Siyyid Ahmad Khan, that many years ago took my English Bible and opened to the words of the Christian Apostle Peter, and read : " God is no respecter of person, but in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him." Although I had read the Christian Bible for some years that wonderful verse of inspired truth had never been shown me by a single Christian teacher. It was a Moslem who first taught me the all comprehensive breadth of Christianity, and with it that eclectic spirit of the Prophet of Islam, whereby the teachings of the Arabian Prophet can be harmonized and reconciled with those of the Nazarene.

As I have witnessed the mystic rites of Buddhist worship at Osaka in Japan, the whimsical gyrations of dancing dervishes at Cairo, the gorgeous processions of the Vatican, and the crowded church congregations of Protestant London, I had to reconcile it all with the mystic worship of Mecca, or either plunge into the vortex of infidelity or lie stranded on the barren shores of agnosticism. But the Hon. Siyyid Ahmad Khan had placed in my hand a key whereby I could unlock the darkened chamber of religious contradictions, and with the Light of God's Truth discover that in the midst of human error the path of God can be clearly seen. Both the prophets of Christianity and of Islam were eclectics, and it is only when the seeker after God discovers this that he can find that rest and repose of mind which is expressed in the word *Moslem*,—"one resigned to God's will." That which obscures the light is the dense dark cloud of religious bigotry and strife which has arisen between Moslems and Christians ever since the days of the Crusades.

I have been told by an esteemed English friend (a well-known student of the religious systems of the East), that the Christians of America and Great Britain will be shocked at the very thought of any educated person defending the doctrines of Islam ; for whilst Buddhism, with its positive atheism and idolatry, can claim a

respectful consideration amongst English speaking races, the religion of Mohamed, with all its grand conceptions of God, is regarded as too gross and too sensual to admit of a consistent defense. And I readily believe it, for no man can read, as I have done, those ignorant and bigoted attacks on the faith which are scattered broadcast over British India, or the numerous English anti-Moslem works in the British Museum, without feeling assured that the day has not yet come (although it is drawing near), when the despised Moslem can obtain an impartial hearing.

And yet it was Islam which inspired the minds of such men as Ibu Sina (Avicenna), Abul Walid (Averroës), Abu Bakr (Avenpace), and Al Ghazali, and enabled them to retain a knowledge of God amidst the abstractions of philosophical research. It was Islam that crushed a corrupt form of Christianity, and for centuries led the van of the nations in the march of literature and science. It was Islam which drove out atheistic Buddhism from Central Asia and the whole of India, and gave to wild and uncivilized tribes a knowledge of the true God. And it is Islam which still defies the efforts of wealthy missionary corporations (animated for the most part by strong party considerations rather than with a desire to propagate truth), and still claims the homage and devotion of 180 millions of the human race. Every Friday converts to Islam from heathenism are received by hundreds in the great cities of India, while even Christians are compelled to admit that Islam is spreading with marvelous rapidity through the whole continent of Africa. Modern Christianity, clothed, as it is, in the hateful garb of the conqueror, can never establish itself in the East, nor can it with its ascetic demands suit itself to the requirements of savage races.

The more the religion of the Moslem is investigated, the more does it claim the respectful homage of those who study its teachings. John Louis Burckhardt, a Swiss Protestant, was one of the first Europeans who made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and after years of study he died a faithful Moslem, and was buried at Cario. Palgrave, in his "Travels in Arabia," manifests much bigotry regarding Islam, but in his "Essays on Eastern Questions" his views are completely changed. Mr. Bosworth Smith, one of the Christian teachers of the great school at Harrow, studied Islam as a scholar, and is forced to admit that Mohamed is a "very

prophet of God." There are not 200 converts from Islam to Christianity in the whole world, and of the eighty Moslems baptized in Constantinople not one has remained firm in his new faith.

But we are told Islam persecutes! Stay, my Christian brother! I have visited Smithfield where Christians were burnt by Christians, and I have stood on Boston Common where Christian Puritans hanged Christian Quakers, and I find in America that religious liberty is not yet extended to the Mormons. Islam has never professed complete religious toleration, but even Christian writers admit that the Saracen Arabs who conquered Jerusalem and Damascus and subdued the whole of Syria and Persia, were a brave and generous race, friendly to Christians, content to place them under certain restrictions, and exacting from them a small tribute for protection, *but ever extending to them freedom of worship*. When the Moslem conqueror Walid seized Damascus he even allowed Christians and Moslems to worship in the same church. Islam is called by Christians the "religion of the sword," but there is not a religion on the face of the earth that has not been propagated by conquest and sustained by intolerance. When the Turcomans of Central Asia embraced Islam, they conquered and slaughtered the Saracens of Syria long before they threatened the borders of Christendom. Religious liberty is a modern invention unknown to the ancients, and even now it is a question whether the civil magistrate would view with indifference the conversion of Boston to the religion of Mohamed! But it is asserted that Mohamedanism is immoral! That is, the slavery of Egypt is immoral but not that of Virginia; the divorce of Baghdad is immoral but not that of Chicago; the polygamy of Bokhara is immoral but not the drunkenness of London. So immoral is Islam that Mr. Gladstone would drive it "bag and baggage to to Baghdad," although it must be admitted that the Christians of Bulgaria are not much better than the Moslems of Constantinople, and that the sober and abstemious legions of the Sultan are as reputable, although polygamous, as the British regiments of India with their licensed prostitution. Anti-Moslem literature is always based on the assumption that Moslem countries are so infinitely below Christian countries in morality. It is a pure assumption, as every Moslem can testify after a few weeks residence in Paris, London, or New York. Uncivilized Moslems are superior to uncivilized Christians in their standard

of morality, and if under more civilized conditions of life the natural outcome of Islam has been an unlimited license regarding marriage and divorce; the outcome of the teachings of Christianity has been an unlimited degree of intemperance, with unparalleled prostitution in large centres of population. The Nazarenes should learn the lesson their master taught them, not to cast the stone; or as the Holy Koran saith, "O, ye believers, avoid frequent slanders, for slanders are a crime."

But all this may be considered a digression from my subject. For I am called upon to explain, why I, an educated man, reading and speaking western languages, and having traveled into all parts of the civilized world, can still declare myself a believer in the mission of Mohamed and give my assent to the creed "there is no deity but Allah, and Mohamed is His messenger." It is a question constantly asked me by ladies and gentlemen of all stations and ranks in life, and I find the mysterious folds of my turban and the buttonless arrangement of my pijamahs, kurta, and khiftan excite far less astonishment than the strange fact that I after listening to the persuasive eloquence of a Liddon, a Spurgeon and a Talmage can yet declare that I am "a Moslem," a believer in the Koran and all its peculiar dogmas and practice. It is years since my pious father instilled into my youthful mind the five great duties of the true Moslem, belief in God, the need of prayer, the blessings of benevolence, the benefits of abstinence, and the solemn duty of paying a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime; and in the six great dogmas of faith, the unity of God, the inspiration of prophets, the revelation in books, the ministry of angels, the reality of future punishment, and the duty of resignation to the decrees of the Almighty. They were presented to my youthful mind as mere dogmas, and oftentimes has my faith been staggered as I have seen them misrepresented in Christian books; but whilst education and travel have vastly expanded my views regarding their true interpretation, I find in them all that is needed to discipline the human soul to that condition which is expressed in the word "Moslem"—"one who is resigned."

Islam is a comprehensive system, for when it is asserted "Mohamed is the Messenger of God," it is not intended to imply that he is the only prophet. Our Moslem writers admit that up to the Mohamedan era there had been not fewer than 124,000

prophets, of whom 315 were special "Apostles" of religious systems. It is evident, therefore, that Mohamed never intended to inculcate the narrow views of the Christian and the Jew regarding inspiration. In the Koran itself the prophetic character of Lukman, Heber, and Zu'l Karnain is admitted, and it would be consistent with this broad spirit of interpretation to call Socrates, Plato, and even Gautama the Buddha "prophets of God."

Nor is Islam anti-Christian, for Mohamed's profound reverence for the mission and work of Jesus is evident in every page of the Koran. Mohamed never claimed for himself a higher title than "the servant and messenger" of the Most High, but he dignified the Redeemer of Israel with the titles of *Al Maseeh*, the Christ, *Kalimat Ullah*, the Word of God, and *Ruh Ullah*, the Spirit of God. The Koran, it is true, does not teach the Trinity (nor does the Gospel), but the true Moslem, in his conceptions of the mysterious nature of God, is far nearer the Trinitarian than the Unitarian, inasmuch as he is taught to believe that the "Light of Mohamed" existed before the creation of time.

Mohamed never contemplated the overthrow of Christianity, for he taught his followers to wait patiently for the second advent of Jesus. The minaret of the mosque at Damascus on which Jesus will descend and the open space near the tomb of Omer for the burial place of the Christian prophet are but confirmations of this popular belief. But there is no project of Islam ever giving place to Christianity. Islam is essentially an oriental religion and suited to the conditions of oriental life. It adapted itself to the civilization of Baghdad and Cordova in its golden age, and it has planted itself on the ruins of a coarse and effete idolatry in Central Asia, and taught the wild tribes of Turkistan the worship of the living God. Eastern races take unkindly to the peculiar phases of Christianity forced upon them by English and American missionaries, for while modern Christianity seems to adapt itself to the conditions of fashionable European life, it is to the Eastern mind but a parody on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who was in thought and life an Oriental among Orientals.

The claims of Mohamed as a commissioned prophet of God are historic. His position as such rests on as firm historic basis as that of Moses, who is his own historian, or of Jesus, whose historic identity rests on the testimony of his own disciples. In proof of this let the English reader peruse Mr. Arthur Gilman's "Story of the Sara-

cen," in which the simple narrative of Mohamed's inspiration is graphically told. The whole story is as real and life-like as that of the birth of Jesus. Mohamed, the prophet, is no myth. The time was when the Prophet of Islam was stigmatized as an "impostor," but European critics are now beginning to see that to reject Mohamed as a sincere man would necessitate a rejection of the historic Christ.

The character of Mohamed has been too often attacked by unscrupulous and unthinking men. Dean Prideaux, who found no difficulty in accepting the inspiration of a David or even a Solomon, is largely responsible for the gross misrepresentation of the Prophet's character. The Prophet of Arabia never professed to be a perfect man. But it was he who, in the midst of a licentious and polygamous people, lived purely with one wife, and that wife his senior in age by many years. His ten marriages, contracted after he was fifty-three years of age, were formed chiefly from a desire for male progeny as well as to extend protection to widows of vanquished enemies and to strengthen his relationship with leading families; a custom common to all Oriental nations. The Prophet is charged by Christian writers (who seem to be perfectly oblivious to the enormity of "righteous Lot's" grievous sin and the strange peculiarities of David's deathbed) with two flagrant sins: his connection with Mary, his Coptic slave, and his marriage with Zainab, the divorced wife of his foster son, Zaid. In neither of these transactions does the Moslem see the least moral delinquency. Mary was as lawful to Mohamed as Hagar was to Abraham, and Zainab was afforded protection by the Prophet after her divorce from her unamiable consort. The Prophet is also charged with cruelty, but what cruelty compared with the wholesale slaughter of the Canaanites? In attacking the character of the Arabian Prophet the Christian polemic does but weaken his own cause for the saints of old, and New Testament history needs far more apology and defense than the Saints of Islam.

The Koran is admitted by even Sir William Muir to be the most genuine and authentic book on record. Christians have revised and re-revised their Bible, but after a lapse of 1260 years Moslems have precisely the same Koran which was put forth as Mohamed's production only two years after his death. As an historic record it stands unequalled in the history of literature. It took the Christians two centuries to decide the claims of their

inspired book, whereas the Koran is exactly the same as that acknowledged by Moslems only two years after its founder's death. Now, after a lapse of eighteen centuries, Christian doctors reject the "three witnesses" to the divinity of their prophet, whilst Moslems can take into their hand the Arabic Koran without a single doubt as to its being "the Book" which was given to them by their prophet twelve centuries ago.

The Koran has often been ridiculed by Christians. But viewed from either an intellectual or a spiritual standpoint it is truly a wonderful book. The Arabs of the desert regarded it as a message sent down from the very heaven and the advanced Moslem thinker sees in it a remarkable record of the workings of the Prophet's mind as he struggled with the deep things of God, and wrestled with the doubts and cavils of an unbelieving world. It is a consistent book, for although it was addressed to the nomad tribes of Arabia and not to the savans of Leipsic and Boston, it has claimed the devout reverence of the learned Moslem of Baghdad and Cordova in the golden age of Islam, and well has the homage of the wildest and most warlike tribes of the earth.

Christians have ever regarded Islam as immoral, and were a colony of Moslems to establish themselves in America it is very certain that the United States, with all its boasted religious freedom, would not admit them to citizenship. Islam, with its noble traditions of Saracen conquest, is expected to view with favor the puny attempts of American missionaries to convert the Turkish Empire to Christianity and intemperance; but the whole of Europe would rise to arms were Moslems to reciprocate by establishing a Moslem mission in London. The Moslem Khalifah has, by means of political intrigue, been compelled to afford protection to Christian missionaries and even to their quasi converts from Islam, and even to authorize the circulation of the Bible in Turkish dominions, but would the Congress at Washington reciprocate by affording protection to Moslem evangelists in Utah? I have put this question more than once, and I have received the reply "But Islam is immoral."

The Moslem system is held to be immoral on account of its sanction of polygamy! But will Christians quote a single passage in the whole of their Bible prohibiting polygamy? With the help of a Cruden's concordance I have searched the whole book through, and I find that only bishops are restricted to one

wife, an exception which surely proves the rule in early Jewish Christianity. Jesus said : " They twain shall be one flesh," and the Koran saith, " Your Lord created you from one soul." Nay more, the Koran so far from encouraging polygamy gave its express permission to take four wives with the strict proviso, " if you cannot deal justly with so many, then only marry one." And in India and in other parts of the Moslem world there is a growing conviction that polygamy is as much opposed to Koranic legislation as it is to the general progress of civilized society and true culture. But even the great Protestant saint, Luther, allowed Philip of Hesse to take a second wife, and with the whole of the New Testament teaching before him, said : " I confess for my part that if a man wishes to marry two or more wives, I cannot forbid him, nor is his conduct repugnant to Holy Scripture ;" while the Holy Father of orthodox Catholic Christianity found no difficulty in arranging for the cruel divorce of the great Napoleon. The system of ethics established by the Koran is pre-eminently practical and cannot be judged by the ascetic standard of Jesus Christ ; but it is evident that Mohamed sanctioned polygamy by way of restriction and not of license among a people who observed no nuptial contract. The religious system of Mohamed is declared immoral on account of its supposed unlimited sanction of divorce, a misconception only removed by a careful study of its laws. Moses " suffered " divorce ; so did Mohamed. But the Prophet said it was hateful in God's sight although lawful to mankind. So abominable is divorce regarded by respectable Mohamedan families that it is almost unknown among the better classes. It is, in fact, far more common among the Christians of Chicago than among the Moslems of Calcutta. The truth is, no religious system in the world has been able to withstand the vice, and like Moses of old all religious teachers have " suffered it " for the hardness of men's hearts. Islam is said to give divine sanction to slavery. So did the Torah of Moses. Mohamed found domestic slavery existing in Arabia, just as Jesus did in Syria ; but whilst the former restrained it by healthful legislation the latter did not interfere with it by either word or deed. Let the word " slave " be substituted for " servant " in the English Bible (as it ought to be), and the Christian reader will be astonished at the result. America freed itself of slavery by the sacrifice of a million lives, but the prophet of

Arabia taught from the very first that he who redeemed a slave from bondage would rescue his own soul from the fires of hell. It cost civilized Christianity a million lives to learn a truth which the Prophet of Arabia taught centuries ago. As a contrast to the hard and cruel spirit of Christian slavery, Mohammed enacted that the bond maid who bore a child to her master secured her emancipation, and no such story as that of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" could have been devised out of Moslem slavery.

The Paradise of Islam has also been regarded as sensual and immoral. Mohamed never intended it to be other than figurative, as figurative as the song of Solomon of Old Testament inspiration, and as the Diwan of Hafiz among Eastern poets. Even Sir William Muir admits that it is remarkable that the notices of this voluptuous paradise are almost entirely confined to a time when the Prophet was living chaste and temperate with a wife of three score years of age. The mystic love of the Eastern devotee has always been typified by the passionate love of earthly relationships, and the absence of such references in the Revelation of Saint John makes it a subject of doubt as to whether that mysterious compilation ever emanated from the pen of a Syrian fisherman. But it is not the object of the present article to undermine the faith of any man in God's inspired record. There is no inspired view of inspiration, and the educated Moslem is as conscious of the difficulties of the subject as the educated Christian; but the necessity of religious belief is forced upon the mind of the Moslem both by historic evidence and by spiritual intuition. The Moslem, more than any other, is more conscious of his need of Divine help, for it is expressed in the initial chapter of the Koran, and recited hundreds of times in his daily liturgy: "Guide us in the right path, oh, God, even in the gracious path of those to whom Thou art merciful."

It is now three years since I stood in pilgrim garb on my way to Mecca, crying with the enthusiasm of the early Moslems "Lubaikah! I stand up for Thy service, O God!" and my contact with anti-Moslem systems has but increased my reverence for the Prophet and the Faith of Islam. I was told the Meccan ceremonies were a remnant of past barbarism. But surely not more so than the ancient rites of the Jewish Temple. Both are of God, and the pilgrims who annually make the Hajj learn in that desert land lessons of light and truth in the same way

that Israel was taught of God when it pitched its mysterious tabernacle in the wilderness for forty years.

Much more might be written. But, in short, I am a Moslem, "resigned to God's will," because I recognize in Islam one of the many avenues through which the Creator of the Universe leads His people to the Temple of Truth.

ابن عربی